

1 Introduction: Networks of Reception

Newspapers, periodicals, and magazines – which I collectively call ‘the press’ – provided the backbone of eighteenth-century news networks, of social and political life, and of literary, artistic, and creative activity; they also supplied the currency of sociable exchange.¹ As one magazine contributor wrote, they formed ‘the truest pictures of the manners and principles of the times; we should consult them to discover the reigning foibles and fashions’ and ‘popular subjects’.² These publications responded to the immediacy of events, international and local, and provided a litmus-test venue for new cultural products entering the market.³ Literary reception took the form of critical reviews, which were also strongly marked by creativity – many reviewers employed parodic humour and playful inventiveness to make their point.⁴ These tendencies were magnified in the various forms of creative writing also published in the press, including imitative responses to new or popular works, through which numerous, often anonymous reader-creators channelled critical opinions, admiration, or pleasure, or capitalised on the fame of the latest publishing success.

This Element explores the reception of Laurence Sterne (1713–68), a pioneer of fiction in the mid-eighteenth century, as disseminated through the British press from 1760 to the 1820s.⁵ Sterne offers a significant case study for understanding the press’s wider role in shaping literary reception in this period. From the outset, his works attracted critical discourse and creative enterprises alike, a heterogeneous body of material known as ‘Sterneana’. 1760 marks Sterne’s rapid rise to fame with the publication of the first two volumes of his serialised work, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759–67). By 1820, Sterne’s reception – now encompassing more instalments of *Tristram Shandy*, *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (1768), sermons, and posthumous publications (most prominently, his correspondence) following his death in 1768 – had changed significantly, partly in tandem with shifting literary tastes. So, too, had the press. Although Jeremy Black voices scepticism towards ‘crucial dates’ in the history of British newspapers, press publications in all forms began to look and read differently during the early decades of the nineteenth century.⁶ While this study covers a set time-span for feasibility, there is also a rationale for aligning noticeable modulations in Sterne’s reception with those in press history; it also lays groundwork for further exploring these domains in future.

¹ Barker, *Newspapers*, pp. 10–11. ² *Universal Museum*, 1 (January 1762), 25.

³ Heyd, ‘News Craze’, 62–8. ⁴ Donoghue, *Fame Machine*, pp. 2–3.

⁵ I also discuss selected Irish, French, and American titles. ⁶ Black, *English Press*, pp. ix–x.

‘Of all the names of literary figures that appear in the columns of newspapers and magazines during the 1760’s, none appears so often, over such an extended period of time, or with such a variety of praise and censure as that of Laurence Sterne’, Alan B. Howes writes.⁷ That presence continually emerged in reviews, allusions, passing references, advertisements, afterlives, fragmented stories, poems, essays, serialised fiction, and Sternean name-tags, which focused on Sterne specifically – consolidating an authorial brand forged by his celebrity – or which, opportunistically, had little to do with either author or work beyond a superficial link. Sterne’s presence in the press shaped his reception as significantly as, if not more than, the numerous adaptations in book-form typically used to describe it. The press contributed materially towards establishing his complicated status as admirable yet subject to censure, as ‘inimitable’ yet widely imitated. He was increasingly recognised as an author of note who deserved attention in the growing industry of literary criticism, positioned alongside but also distinguished from other writers. The press provided a platform for the visibility and dissemination of the Sternean brand comparable with, but distinct from that available to his contemporaries. Sterne’s case, as both atypical and characteristic of its time, in turn illustrates wider trends in newspapers, magazines, and periodicals, including how they catalysed the transition from popular success and celebrity to literary significance, even while they fostered cultures of anonymity.

Critical and Creative Networks

The eighteenth century witnessed the emergence of what might now be described as the professionalisation of literary criticism, facilitated by publications that reviewed new works, which took hold from the mid-century onwards with two major periodicals, Ralph Griffiths’s *Monthly Review* (1749–1845) and the *Critical Review* (1756–1817), first edited by Tobias Smollett. Reviews appeared across numerous magazines and newspapers, too, with differing readerships and aims. Critical and creative modes frequently intermeshed in reviews, and in new items printed in the press.⁸ For one, this was a particularly fertile era for the imaginative adaptations that saw popular and successful publications transformed into new forms in alternative contexts of reception.⁹ Many of the best-known eighteenth-century novels experienced afterlives, across art forms and genres,¹⁰ including Daniel Defoe’s *Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1719),¹¹ Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*

⁷ Howes, *Yorick and the Critics*, p. 1. ⁸ Elliott, *Theorizing Adaptation*, p. 35.

⁹ Suarez, ‘Business of Fiction’, pp. 30–2.

¹⁰ Fairer, ‘Introduction’, pp. xxvi–vii; Elliott, *Theorizing Adaptation*, pp. 42–58.

¹¹ Lipski, ‘Introduction’, pp. 1–6.

(1726);¹² and Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), a publishing phenomenon partly manifested in and spread through adaptations – a forerunner to Sterne's reception.¹³ Within the creative and commercial economies of eighteenth-century literary cultures, these transferral practices – involving parody, imitation, pastiche, burlesque, and which could in turn fuel satirical or polemic aims¹⁴ – recirculated and recycled existing materials in what David Brewer has described as a 'feedback loop' linking creators and consumers.¹⁵ Brewer's model parallels Simone Murray's proposal for 'a *sociology* of adaptation' that takes into account modern-day 'institutional, commercial and legal frameworks' pertaining to the 'cultural circulation' of adaptations.¹⁶ The aim here is to think in a comparable way about how textual materials intertwined within the distinctive contexts of the eighteenth-century press, a unique sociological pool of production and consumption, critical analysis and creation, in which adaptive processes prospered.

The popularity of afterlife was closely linked with demographic shifts in reading.¹⁷ A rapidly expanding market of consumers benefited from rising literacy levels, although claims about widespread literacy should be treated with caution; many readers were nevertheless able to buy or to borrow printed works far more easily than previous generations. The financial motility especially enjoyed by the so-called middling classes, expanded printing networks, and diversified environments for accessing printed material accelerated and disseminated reading via circulating libraries, coffee houses, and booksellers' shops throughout London and across an extensive provincial system.¹⁸ While books were inevitably significant in these contexts, apparently more ephemeral items, such as chapbooks and broadside ballads – and press publications – considerably expanded the printed matter available to disparate types of audience.¹⁹ "Ephemera" is not a *thing* but a classification', Paula McDowell writes, which galvanised in the later eighteenth century as 'a response to the commercialization of letters and the proliferation of print'.²⁰ Ephemeral press publications passed through multiple hands with a scale and rapidity of production and circulation that was not matched by books; the consequences for the spread of an author's work, or for the idea of an author – captured in a name and

¹² Cook, 'Further Voyages', pp. 192–4. ¹³ Keymer and Sabor, 'Pamela', pp. 1–5.

¹⁴ Hutcheon, *Theory of Adaptation*, pp. 4–9, pp. 16–17.

¹⁵ Brewer, *Afterlife*, p. 6, p. 14. See also Barker, *Newspapers*, pp. 103–4.

¹⁶ Murray, *Adaptation Industry*, p. 4. ¹⁷ Williams, *Social Life*, p. 11.

¹⁸ Ellis, 'Poetry and Civic Urbanism', pp. 52–4; Barker, *Newspapers*, p. 46; Raven, *Business of Books*, p. 91.

¹⁹ Seager, 'The Novel's Afterlife', p. 112; Somers, *Ephemeral Print Culture*, pp. 3–8; Suarez, 'Business of Fiction', pp. 35–6.

²⁰ McDowell, 'Of Grubs and Other Insects', pp. 31–2.

labels attached to his or her writing – were considerable. The press was also as important in the ‘shared reading’ practices associated with books described by Abigail Williams.²¹ Circulating libraries, for instance, which carried a range of printed materials, created what Mark Vareschi calls a network of ‘virtual circulation’ in which reader-consumers were intrinsically connected: without physically meeting, they shared in a common pool of reading matter.²² For Brewer, this fashioned a form of ‘sociability’ that was ‘almost wholly virtual’, inviting an imaginative participation that was particularly conducive to literary afterlives.²³ The press facilitated the expansion and activity of these virtual communities of readers-creators in ways distinct from books:²⁴ as a mode of publication that relied and thrived on multi-sided input, the press’s network of anonymous, unknown, and unnumbered readers and contributors provides perhaps the closest eighteenth-century parallel to present-day fora such as social media chatrooms or fan-fiction sites, as Margaret J. M. Ezell and Jennie Batchelor, among others, have suggested.²⁵

These environments for harbouring anonymity jostled alongside an equally lively emergent celebrity culture in this period. Significant critical attention has been given to figures including David Garrick, Samuel Johnson, or Lady Mary Wortley Montagu.²⁶ Sterne, as we shall see, unexpectedly found a notorious fame that fed into both critical and creative reactions to his work, and which, Thomas Keymer suggests, Sterne adeptly manipulated.²⁷ His case richly demonstrates how celebrity culture fictionalises a public figure that is both allied to the reality of a person and a fabrication. The press fostered this image-making industry, as Uriel Heyd argues: ‘Eighteenth-century readers were hungry for celebrity items, newspapers were happy to cater’, which ‘fame-seeking individuals’ exploited.²⁸ The press nevertheless exerted a seemingly contradictory function: it marketed celebrity, but it also cultivated anonymity and obscurity; many who felt they might have a go at writing were liberated by creative fora where numerous nameless contributors could put their efforts into print – including those that responded creatively to celebrated authors or publications. Nevertheless, one outcome of this Element is that it reveals how, somewhat paradoxically, while the press fostered a democratising free-play of creativity among reader-contributors, it also served a significant role in canon formation. By giving prominence to certain works, or their authors, or both – including by

²¹ Williams, *Social Life*, p. 7. ²² Vareschi, *Everywhere and Nowhere*, p. 143.

²³ Brewer, *Afterlife*, p. 14. See also Newbould, “[It] Were Wisdome It Selfe”, 165.

²⁴ Heyd, ‘News Craze’, 73–4.

²⁵ Ezell, *Early English Periodicals*, pp. 2–3; Batchelor, “Connections”, 255–6, 259–61; Batchelor, *The ‘Lady’s Magazine’*, pp. 222–3, pp. 226–7; see also Powell, *Performing Authorship*, pp. 2–3.

²⁶ Jones and Joule (eds.), *Intimacy and Celebrity*, pp. 2–3. ²⁷ Keymer, ‘Small Particles’, p. 17.

²⁸ Heyd, ‘Fifteen Lines of Fame’, pp. 100–104.

publishing adaptations they inspired – the press helped to establish many writers' significance in literary history. It facilitated both academic canonicity and the 'social canon' in a dual motion that simultaneously centralised and decentralised celebrity works or authors, and which both promoted and obscured anonymous contributors.²⁹ A query underlying this case study is how far Laurence Sterne's evolving position as an author of note – and, increasingly, of 'classic' status – was dependent on his continual presence in reviews and creative reactions that fed into the tangled web of materials held by press publications. Although it lies beyond the scope of this Element to explore other contemporary authors in detail, it nevertheless prompts a running query that can be more fully addressed elsewhere regarding how distinctive or how typical Sterne's case was in these respects.

Approaching Sterne's presence in the press as participating in a network of original invention and creative adaptation, celebrity and obscurity, transience and lasting fame, helps to resituate the hierarchical assumptions that risk imposing biased value judgements on literary, and especially adaptive materials, and on the ephemeral outlets in which they appeared.³⁰ Qualitative evaluation necessarily forms part of any literary-critical enterprise, yet it is striking how accounts of Sterneana sometimes feel compelled to reinforce its worthlessness: one of the biggest collections (held at Cambridge University Library) was amassed by J. C. T. Oates, but he repeatedly dismissed its items as 'trivial', 'rubbish', 'tasteless and barren', 'lunatic', 'irredeemable twaddle', and so on.³¹ Value judgements shift if we move away from thinking about adaptations as solely dependent upon an originary source, especially a famous one. Paul Goring highlights the drawbacks of '-ana'-oriented narratives, which can privilege an author-centric approach that too simply confirms notions of canonicity that were more nuanced in their own historical moment – although, he concludes, 'Sterneana' remains a useful critical term.³² Beyond Sterne, Daniel Cook and Nicholas Seager suggest that, if we consider eighteenth-century adaptation in terms of 'mutual relations between "versions" of works' rather than of restrictive hierarchies, then we gain a richer picture of the period's cultural productivity.³³

'Networks' provides one way of describing adaptive practices as part of a non-hierarchical environment of literary productivity, and of the patterns of criticism and creativity mapped across press publications explored here.³⁴ Franco Moretti's diagrams representing relations between literary works' character and plot elements, for instance, visualise a simultaneous bunching and dispersal of connecting

²⁹ Brewer, citing Franco Moretti, *Afterlife*, p. 17. ³⁰ Elliott, *Theorizing Adaptation*, pp. 43–4.

³¹ Oates, *Shandyism*. See also Bandry, *Créations*, p. 7.

³² Goring, 'Authorial Authority', 182–5. ³³ Cook and Seager, 'Introduction', p. 2.

³⁴ Goring, 'Network of Networks', p. 4.

nodes that concentrates on specific points but also decentralises any given node.³⁵ As Goring points out, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's now often-cited network theory similarly rejects the hierarchical implications of arborescence.³⁶ Their preference for the rhizome – a botanical term that describes an underground plant stem which can produce the roots and shoots of a new plant – posits a multi-nodal approach that situates the originary work as one among a cluster of creative products that feed off and into each other.³⁷ The metaphors Deleuze and Guattari develop – of a book as 'an assemblage . . . in connection with other assemblages and in relation to other bodies without organs' – serve network theory and, in turn, the circulatory systems of adaptation, and of press publications.³⁸ As Black writes, eighteenth-century newspapers 'were part of a far from enclosed system of information', intersecting with 'printed matter, such as books and magazines, and unprinted matter, such as newsletters and merchants' correspondence'.³⁹ Network theories have also been assigned to Sterne's work – John Havard, for instance, uses 'social network analysis' to discuss the connections between Sterne's fiction and his politics⁴⁰ – and to Sterneana, as Goring shows.⁴¹ The concept and motions of networks characterise the interactive relations belonging to Sterne's reception, and its aptness as a case study demonstrating how press publications embodied such generative exchanges.

'Brand Sterne' and the Press

Sterne was an unlikely candidate for celebrity.⁴² He was middle-aged by the time he produced *Tristram Shandy* and *A Sentimental Journey* in the final decade of his life. Until 1760, he pursued the fairly typical career of a rural clergyman who had published two sermons and *A Political Romance* (1759), a short pamphlet satirising local clerical politics, which was suppressed; it nonetheless gave Sterne the taste for a type of comic writing that he developed in the first two volumes of *Tristram Shandy*.⁴³ Initially printed in York in December 1759 but distributed in London in January 1760, they promptly sold out. Sterne became an overnight success along with his book, and the first wave of 'Shandymania' took hold, manifested in critical reviews and imitative pieces – mostly pamphlets and items printed in the press.⁴⁴ They foregrounded the most distinctive Shandean traits: bawdy humour, innuendo, wide-ranging references to other authors and books, self-reflexive metafiction,

³⁵ Moretti, 'Network Theory', 84–6. ³⁶ Goring, 'Authorial Authority', 183.

³⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, pp. 6–8; Goring, 'Authorial Authority', 193.

³⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, p. 5. See also Nicklas and Lindner, 'Adaptation', p. 2.

³⁹ Black, *English Press*, pp. 87–8. ⁴⁰ Havard, 'Only Disconnect?', p. 268, pp. 277–8.

⁴¹ Goring, 'Authorial Authority', 183–5, 193–4. ⁴² Cash, *Later Years*, pp. 1–21.

⁴³ Sterne, *Miscellaneous Writings*, p. xviii.

⁴⁴ For in-depth discussions, see Bandry, *Créations*; Bosch, *Labyrinths*; Newbould, *Adaptations*.

inventive typography, graphic features, and memorable characters.⁴⁵ Sterne quickly capitalised upon his unexpected fame by publishing two volumes of his own sermons in May 1760 under the provocative title *The Sermons of Mr. Yorick*, the borrowed name of *Tristram Shandy*'s fictional parson. Success bred ambition: two more volumes of *Tristram Shandy* appeared the following year, then two further instalments of two volumes each, until a final, lone volume 9 appeared in 1767. *Tristram Shandy*'s serialised publication drove an energetically interactive dialogue with its critics and imitators.⁴⁶

A Sentimental Journey's reception followed a different pattern. Only two volumes of an originally promised four were published in February 1768, as Sterne died shortly afterwards in March. It was well-received by critics, who admired its moralistic pathos, and it inspired posthumous adaptations that responded to the work's apparently defining feature, sensibility, but also to its complex handling by Sterne. From more straightforwardly sentimentalised fragments and fuller-length works, to pathetic songs and affective images, to innuendo-laced continuations and erotic illustrations, *A Sentimental Journey* stimulated diverse responses that engaged with the text's own malleability, but also with the by-then wider array of materials, including posthumous publications, comprising what was meant by 'Sterne' as a label: an eventual seven volumes of sermons, correspondence, and shorter works packaged up with the letters, including Sterne's memoirs, *A Political Romance*, and his 'Rabelaisian Fragment'. Further complexity emerges given that, although this Element focuses on Sterne's early reception in the British Isles, his work has consistently been read, translated, and adapted across the European continent, North America, and further afield, as reflected in global press outlets that, like British counterparts, harboured wide-ranging critical and creative responses to Sterne.⁴⁷

Opinions continually oscillated between disapproval and enthusiastic praise, reflecting how far readers remained divided about what to make of Sterne's eclectic output. The task for readers and critics of making sense of Sterne was made more challenging by the extent to which the semi-fictional identity of the author himself was enmeshed in the production and the perception of his written output. 'Brand Sterne' – comprising, in part, a cluster of lexical terms which rapidly emerged across reviews and creative responses – to a degree helped to codify this perplexing author and his mixed output, while simultaneously acknowledging his commercial success and celebrity status.⁴⁸ In a comparable way to the 'processes of repetition and virtualization' that Vareschi notes of

⁴⁵ Keymer, *Sterne*, pp. 4–8.

⁴⁶ Bandry, *Créations*, p. 245; Keymer, *Sterne*, pp. 85–110, pp. 121–49.

⁴⁷ See Voogd and Neubauer (eds.), *Reception*.

⁴⁸ The coinage 'brand Sterne' recalls Andrew Pettegree, *Brand Luther*.

Defoe's *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana*, whereby their titular names were repeatedly recirculated but increasingly detached from 'the physical book and content', Sterne's writing, and his own name, were subject to a labelling seemingly attached to author and work, but which was also a fictive construct;⁴⁹ 'After all, a *brand* is not a product in its own right, but rather is a sign or, even more concretely, an icon that embodies an identity myth.'⁵⁰ Created by critical impetuses and commercial interests, the Sternean label fed off Sterne's celebrity status and served ostensibly to make author and work more easily identifiable, but also marketable – which spin-offs readily exploited.⁵¹ The press was an adept mechanism for advertising and recirculating this sellable brand.

The labelling belonging to Sterne's reception in part confirms the dynamics of the literary market in ways that align with Catherine Gallagher's examination of 'nothingness and disembodiment' in women's writing of the long eighteenth century: she deliberately chooses known, named authors – not 'ignored, silenced, erased, or anonymous women' – to explore the workings of a patriarchal marketplace.⁵² As a named, male, white, Anglican clergyman, 'Sterne' was an identifiable authorial signifier that carried establishment weight – but also certain expectations that, if they were considered unmet, supplied critical ballast (the clash between his clerical and fiction-writing professions, for instance). The brand label seemed to confirm success, commercial and popular, but its very fabrication as a 'sign' that embodied a 'myth' challenged straightforwardly authoritative authorship. For Brewer, 'reconstructing' how the names of key authors were used as signpost-labels can better access 'a then-pervasive conception of authorship . . . the idea that authors *qua* authors were not fully human', and that they (and their works) could 'operate more like counters to be pushed around than straightforward indices pointing toward specific biographical individuals'.⁵³ These disembodied conceptions of authorship both confirmed and contested the canonical associations of authorial (celebrity) naming.⁵⁴ Sterne inhabited the 'posture' of his brand to assert his position as a literary celebrity, but the interactive nature of literary reception in general, and of Sterne's in particular, made any such assertions of self-image highly volatile in the entanglement of genuine works, critical reviews, and creative reactions, which endured after Sterne's death.⁵⁵

Sterneana in the form of books, pamphlets, illustrations, artworks, and realia has received sustained attention; however, Sterne's reception in periodicals, newspapers, and magazines has been examined less consistently or thoroughly,

⁴⁹ Vareschi, *Everywhere and Nowhere*, pp. 130–1. ⁵⁰ Braber et al., 'Introduction', p. 11.

⁵¹ Suarez, 'Business of Fiction', pp. 30–1. ⁵² Gallagher, *Nobody's Story*, p. xiii, p. xviii.

⁵³ Brewer, 'Tactility', 195–6. ⁵⁴ Powell, *Performing Authorship*, pp. 29–30.

⁵⁵ Braber et al., 'Introduction', p. 21.